DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 291 634 SO 018 674

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TITLE Entertainment Films and Video in Africa.
INSTITUTION Illinois Univ., Urbana. African Studies Program.
PUB DATE Feb 87
NOTE 6p.; Article printed on colored paper.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *African Culture; *African History; Audiovisual Aids; Censorship; Cultural Awareness; Developing Nations; Educational Resources; Film Production; *Films; Foreign Countries; Instructional Films; Multicultural Education; Multimedia Instruction; Second Languages; Tribes; World Problems
IDENTIFIERS *Africa

ABSTRACT

The film industry in Africa began in 1963. Since then, development has been slow because of funding problems and political restrictions. Television is available to only a fraction of the population and imported programming represents almost one-half of the programming. However, there are some successful African produced television programs. The themes and contents of the films tend to reflect a changing culture, social problems, and colonialism. The work of five filmmakers is discussed in this paper, including four films of Ousmane Sembene ("Ceddo," "Borrom Sarret," "Mandabi," and "Xala"). Sembene's themes concern the African elites and greed, and "Ceddo" has been banned by the government of Senegal. Souleyman Cisse's "Baara" concerns poor and illiterate Africans and the struggle to survive urban life. In Paul Zoumbara's "Jours de Tourmentes", a western educated man tries to introduce modern farming techniques in his home village against opposition from the tribe and his own father. Haile Gerima"s film, "Harvest: 3000 years", the story of three generations in an Ethiopian family, has been highly praised by critics. Ross Dervish's "The Happy Valley" is set in the 1930s and is an expose of the expatriate aristocracy of Kenya. Ordering information is provided. (NL)

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ENTERTAINMENT FILMS AND VIDEO IN AFRICA

by

Louise Crane

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ENTERTAINMENT FILMS AND VIDEO IN AFRICA

Louise Crane

To write this article I had hoped to enlist one of a few African specialists on the subject who are currently in this country--particularly Mbye Cham (from Senegal) at Howard University or Manthia Diawara (from Mali) at University of California/Santa Barbara. Neither one of them was able to do it, however, for both are on their way to the 10th FESPACO film festival, February 21-28, in Ougadougou, Burkina Faso. FESPACO, like the Carthage Film Festival held in Tunis in alternate years, is aimed at promoting African and Arab films. Film-making, especially feature films and videotapes, is not a big industry in Africa, having got a real start only in 1963. That was the year the first African-designed, African-made film, Senegalese Ousmane Sembene's "Borrom Sarret," scored a big hit at the International Festival of Tours in France. Since then Africa has had its own international film festivals, such as the already mentioned Carthage and FESPACO festivals, the annual International Cinema Panorama in Algeria, African Film Week last December in Kenya, and the upcoming Pan-African and Arab Film Symposium in Mogadishu, Somalia, October 12-21 this year.

Some African film-makers--e.g., Ousmane Sembene of Senegal, Souleyman Cisse of Mali, Haile Gerima of Ethiopia, Ola Balogun of Nigeria--have achieved international recognition through these festivals, screenings in Europe and America and reviews in Journals like Variety, but many others are little known, even in their own countries. Nor are the African actors "stars" in the Hollywood sense. FESPACO's theme this year of "Cinema and Cultural Identity" has little meaning where African screens, especially in the cities, are dominated by such Western imports as "Dynasty," "I Love Lucy," or "Star Wars." An Abidjan newspaper story about a new film on traditional Côte d'Ivoire culture commented on the "courage" it took to schedule this film on the same night as "Dallas."

Uprooted from societies where oral traditions prevailed, Africans are faced with the need to use the new communication tools, print and electronic media, in a way that preserves their own identity, at the same time taking their rightful place in the international exchange of ideas and information. For writers and film-makers alike there is the dilemma of how to create a work that will "sell" for an international audience and at the same time preserve African integrity. The 1986 Nobel literature award to Nigeria's Wole Soyinka brought world attention to one of a number of African writers whose works voice both African and universal themes and concerns. With the exception of Ousmane Sembene--internationally known for both his novels and his films--and a few others, most African film-makers are in an experimental period. In an interview with Lizbeth Malkmus the Algerian film-maker, Merzak Allouache, spoke of how Africans without a "cinematic past" can be led into using their cameras in a totally alien way:

> "Once at a film festival in black Africa we, almost all African film-makers, were given an excursion around the city. We went off in a coach and visited villages, huts, African villages, and I saw this amazing image. African film-makers getting out of the coach, taking their cameras, and I asked myself: what is this relationship? They weren't going off to see this village as something that would touch them, but as something totally exterior to them, something that would permit them to fabricate images, later, in Abidjan or even in Paris. This problem has to do with

the demand for the picturesque. In relation to us, Third World film-makers, the demand for the picturesque emanates from Europe. They prefer to see a film shot high up in the mountains, in costume, dealing with traditions." [1]

The need to "sell" in a literal sense is a real one, as African film-makers hard pressed to find the capital for production must turn to government support or co-production with outsiders. Since most African governments are preoccupied with development, they are more inclined to provide funding for films documenting political programs than for "entertainment" films. Some feature films, like Sembene's "Ceddo," have been actually banned because of their implied criticism of the government even in a fictional setting. The Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GIFC), established in the 1960's and the first institution of its kind in West Africa, is still producing documentaries but very few feature films. Just now there is speculation over the fate of the recently opened "Nana Akoto," a feature film by King Apaw co-produced by GIFC with Germany's Reinery Filmproduktion. GIFC's other efforts in feature film production, either alone or with others, have met with little success either at the box office or in government support. For independent film-makers it is also very difficult. Ghanaian Kwaw Ansah carried around his script for "Love Brewed in an African Pot," knocking on doors of financial institutions for ten years before the Social Security Bank agreed to put up the money. For collateral Kwaw Ansah had to use a building owned by his father-in-law. "Love Brewed.." was a great success, enabling Kwaw Ansah to pay off the loan with interest. In spite of his impressive record, however, he had to repeat the gruelling process to find money for his second film.

In spite of all these difficulties, the quality and number of African feature films and video programs is growing, with a greater variety of subject matter and geographical representation among the entries to international film events. Since most of this article must be restricted to films, television can only be mentioned. While only a fraction of the population have access to it--Tanzania and other countries have no television at all--the cultural influence of this media is substantial. As indicated above, imported programs dominate, composing 30% to 50% of the TV material. But there are some popular programs of African origin, such as "The Village Headmaster" series in Nigeria, children's storytelling programs, cultural festivals and dramas. Some examples of these are Images d'Afrique, French teaching materials available from Howard University which include videotapes from Gabon, Cote d'Ivoire and Cameroon (see "Resources..")

Themes and Content of African Films

Like the written literature, many of the films deal with changing cultures and social problems, especially those brought on by colonialism and its continuation through neocolonial African regimes. Ousmane Sembene's "Borrom Sarret" and "Mandabi" (based on his novel) focus particularly on poor and illiterate Africans struggling to survive in an urban environment of greed and corruption. Movement between urban and rural Africa is a common theme, as, for example, in Souleyman Cisse's "Baara" ("The Porter") about the disillusioning experience of a man who leaves his village to find work in the city, or Paul Zoumbara's "Jours de Tourmentes" ("Days of Torment') on the frustrations of a Western-educated young man who tries to introduce modern farming techniques in his home village (in Burkina Faso) but is opposed by both his father and the village chief. Including many humorous scenes, Sembene's "Xala" is a powerful indictment of Africans elites whose mindless embrace of Western culture in search of power and wealth leaves them spiritually and culturally impoverished. In all of Sembene's films there are frequent references to Islam, the dominant

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1. Framework 29 Film Journal, Comedia, London 1985, p. 38.

religion of Senegal, but it is the central focus in his controversial "Ceddo." Here he uses the style of a traditional epic narrative to present a fictionalized "historical" account of Islam's disruption of the political and religious foundations of a 19th century Wolof kingdom. As previously mentioned, because of modern implications, "Ceddo" has been banned in Senegal. Haile Gerima's "Harvest: 3000 Years" is another film which gives historical perspective to modern problems. Very slowly paced, it covers the story of three generations of a rural peasant family in modern Ethiopia, showing their daily life on the farm of a wealthy landowner.

Several more recent films dealing with children's lives in Africa have been winning praise from African and foreign viewers alike. "Nyamanton," ("The Garbage Boys"), first full-length film by Cheik Omar Sissoko of Mali, won the bronze medal at the 1986 Carthage festival, a gold medal at the Mannheim festival, a prize from Confederation Internationale des Cinemas d'Art et d'Essais, and from ACCT (cultural and technical cooperation agency) and has been shown at the London and other film festivals. About children who have to collect garbage to scrape out a living and get an education, Variety's review last December 17 said of it: "..a highly watchable film tinged with moments of humor and crowned with one of the most effective child casts since Vittorio de Sica's 'Shoestring,' it deserves exposure on specialized circuits, repping the best of this year's black African product." The children playing the leading roles in this film have become famous in Bamako (Mali), where people laugh and quote to each other their favorite lines, in Bambara, the local language. "The Happy Valley," set in colonial Kenya and directed by South African Ross Dervish, is an expose of the expatriate aristocracy of Kenya in the thirties through the eyes of a badly treated white teenager who relates better to Africans than to her own "kith and kin." West Africa calls it "a refreshing antidote to 'Out of Africa.'"

While humor is common in even the most serious films, the slapstick variety of films, as far as I know, has been produced largely by white African film-makers such as James Uys and Leon Schuster of South Africa. Despite its U.S. box office success, local critics calling it "the best to cross the screen in recent years," Uys' "The Gods Must Be Crazy" has not amused most Africans, some finding it offensive. Gambian Lare Sisay's comment is typical: "A very simplistic and parochial view of a complex culture spanning thousands of years, this comic strip-like movie must be viewed as just that--a comic strip." Variety's October 15 (1986) review of Leon Schuster's "You Must Be Joking" dismisses it as a film "leaving good taste and style behind....adding, in a sickly comic way to the polarization of two race groups in a troubled society." Most of the good films on South Africa are documentaries but there are a few of the dramatic variety. Strictly speaking, "Woza Albert" is foreign-made (David Thompson, BBC) but it is based on a play written and acted by two black South Africans, combining humor, satire and a gamut of other emotions in one of the most penetrating views of life in apartheid South Africa. South Africa's Nadine Gordimer is best known for her internationally acclaimed short stories and novels, but in recent years she has also been involved in film-making. Six films based on her short stories, all but one filmed in South Africa, dramatize the effects of apartheid on the personal lives of a variety of people. These films and others mentioned here are available for loan from the University of Illinois Film Library (see "Resources..").

Conclusion

While more could be said, it is obvious that African film-making, even of the feature type, has come a long way in little over twenty years. As pointed out earlier, the main obstacles to progress are financial rather than technical. As with everything else in Africa's "development"there is the problem of maintaining some independence while teaming up with others or accepting outside aid. Possibilities are being explored for more inter-African cooperation on production and distribution,

especially for the English-speaking countries, which have less access to the Carthage and FESPACO festivals (both held in francophone countries). This was discussed at the recently held African Film Week in Kenya, but no reports are available.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Africa on Film and Videotapes, 1980-1981: A Compendium of Reviews, African Studies Center, 100 Center for International Programs, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48024-1035. 1982.

Films and Video Resources About Africa, available free from the University of Illinois Film Center. Call toll free 800-367-3456 or in Illinois 800-252-1357.

Images d'Afrique (Teacher's guide with 7 30-minute videotapes). Available from Howard University Dept. of Romance Languages (Washington, D.C.) $243 sale.

Distributors of African Films:

New Yorker Films, 16 W. 61st St., New York, N.Y. 10023 (distributor for Sembene films)

Southern Africa Media Center/California Newsreel, 630 Natoma St., San Francisco, CA 94103 (distributor for "Woza Albert" and documentaries on South Africa)

University of Illinois Film Center (see "Films & Video Resources" above) distributes "Mandabi", "Harvest: 3000 Years" and the Gordimer films; titles, descriptions, rental fees for over 200 films included in the free catalog cited above.

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PENDING OPPORTUNITY FOR TEACHERS: SUMMER PROJECT IN KENYA

March 7, 1987 is the deadline for teacher applications for a proposed residential project in Kenya June 24-August 9, 1987, to be conducted by the African Studies Outreach Program of Yale University. For information and application procedures contact:

Leslie H. Townsend, African Studies
Yale University, Box 13 A
85 Trumbull St., New Haven CT 06520 Tel. (203)432-3438/3437

NEW MOZAMBIQUE PRESIDENT: JOAQUIM CHISSANO

Less publicized than the tragic death in a plane crash of Mozambique's President Samora Machel has been the name of his successor, Joaquim Chissano. Those who have copies of our Curriculum Materials for Teachers, Ed. 2, should note this change on page 2 ("African Countries...) and page 29 ("Fact Sheet on Mozambique"). Mozambique is and will be much in the news as a key country in the South Africa struggle.

MESSAGES FROM COTE D'IVOIRE

On March 22 six high school students and a teacher from Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire will arrive in Urbana-Champaign for a six-week visit with schools they have been writing to since September: University High School (Urbana), Morgan Park (Chicago), Academy Spalding (Peoria). Here are some messages (in English) sent by the Ivorians:

"I would go so far as to say that the real education is not based at the knowledge of one or even several things of your sole country or continent. That's why I accept with a delight to cooperate with you like this."

"Sometimes we hear that those who have never been to Africa think that it is a big forest, I am telling you now that our ancestors used to live in small villages but now most Africans live in cities and some persons live in villages....."